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"Your English Is Suspect": Language, Communication, and the Pathologization of Nigerian Cyber Identity Through the Stylistic Imprints of Nigerian E-Mail Scams

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Abstract

Identity is embedded not just in language but in the communicative and interactional singularities of language and in the linguistic habitus that speakers bring to bear in their relational and discursive encounters. This study explores how Nigerian English speakers, through the ubiquitous 419 e-mail scams, bring with them distinctive stylistic and sociolinguistic imprints in their quotidian dialogic encounters with other English users in the world, which at once construct, constrict, and constrain not only them but also other Nigerian English speakers. I also show links between demotic articulations of Nigerian English in Nigeria and its symbolic approbation and reproduction in the Nigerian news media, and how this conspires to construct Nigerian identity online.

Keywords

communication and Africa, cyberculture, digital media, identity construction, language

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Introduction

In a Facebook status update, a Nigerian professor at a U.S. university narrated how his choice to end an e-mail message with the sentence "I hope to read from you soon" to an American professor he had never met caused him to be thought of as a 419 e-mail scammer. He wrote:

> Was I really wrong? Was the professor at the other end of the telephone line correct? She read my email and decided to withdraw her offer of introducing me to people in environmental education because my written English "is suspect." So I asked her to give me an example of something I expressed incorrectly. The first example was "I hope to read from you soon." She said the correct expression is "I hope to hear from you soon." I cleared my throat and informed her that it was not a face-to-face communication and that I thought the word to hear did not fit into a totally text-based communication. She did not sound impressed and till date never returned my calls. Should I change my communication style and let orality creep into my text? Does anyone know the rules about such things? (O. Kole, personal communication, September 29, 2014)

Ending e-mail communication with "I hope to read from you soon" is not only unconventional among native English speakers; it is also one of the core phrases associated with 419 e-mails from Nigeria, but it is constitutive of the lexical and expressive repertoire of Nigerian English, from which most educated Nigerian English speakers draw unconsciously. The distinctiveness of Nigerian English usage both exoticizes and pathologizes its users, and this is enabled largely by the mainstreaming of algorithmic mediation of online sociality, as I will show later in this study.

Language is inexorably constitutive and reflective of identity, a fact Joseph (2004) captured persuasively when he postulated that "language and identity are ultimately inseparable" (p. 13). Identity is embedded not just in language but in the communicative and interactional singularities of language (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Ochs, 1993; Schiffrin, 1996) and in the linguistic habitus (Bourdieu, 1991) that speakers bring to bear in their relational and discursive encounters.

Nigerian English speakers, who inherited the language from their British colonizers from the "late nineteenth century on" (U. Gut, 2012, p. 216), bring with them distinctive stylistic and sociolinguistic imprints in their quotidian dialogic encounters with other English users in the world that at once construct, constrict, and constrain them (Bamgbose, 1982, 1995; Banjo, 1995, 1996; Jowitt, 1991; Kperogi, 2010, 2015; Taiwo, 2001). However, while the colonially transported British English dialect (Hickey, 2004) that Nigerians inherited, adopted, indigenized, and reproduced through their mass media and demotic dialogic engagements has been systematically studied and analyzed, scholars of Nigerian English have yet to explore how the variety of English popularized

by the ubiquitous advance fee fraud e-mail solicitations, otherwise known as "419," both export Nigerian English beyond Nigeria and construct, even constrain, Nigerian identity in the Anglophone global consciousness. This study examines the structural, grammatical, stylistic, and idiomatic quiddities of typical Nigerian e-mail scam solicitations and how their ubiquity structures perceptions of Nigerians in the Anglophone world, particularly in the West.

Language, Communication, and Identity

It is customary in linguistics and in philosophy of language to ascribe to language the dual roles of communication and representation, often in binary terms. Language is conceived of as the vector of dialogic exchanges between and among disparate members of social communities. It is also theorized as the receptacle of human thoughts and the medium through which we give expression to our subjectivities and impose linguistic order on the chaos of symbolic stimuli that relentlessly surround us. With a few exceptions, since Platonic times, these communicative and representational views of language are often constructed in dichotomous, mutually exclusive categories (Joseph, 2004). In other words, scholars either assigned a communicative or a representational function to language. Only a few scholars came to terms with the inextricability of communication and representation in language. Even fewer saw the ontological and epistemological futility in erecting a binary between communication and representation.

But language, in fact, shoulders a more lumbering ontological burden than just being the vehicle for communication and representation. Bourdieu (1977) points out, for instance, that speech acts, symbolic codes, and communicative encounters are never independent and isolated, but are always embedded in and informed by a labyrinthine network of social relationships and identity formations. As Norton (2010) observes,

> Every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space. Our gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among other characteristics, are all implicated in this negotiation of identity. (p. 350)

Bourdieu (1991) characterizes this as the "performative" dimension of language:

> Regionalist discourse is a performative discourse which aims to impose as legitimate a new definition of the frontiers and to get people to know and recognize the region that is thus delimited in opposition to the dominant definition, [. . .] which does not acknowledge that new region. The act of categorization, when it manages to achieve recognition or when it is exercised by a recognized authority, exercises by itself a certain power: "ethnic" or "regional" categories, like categories of

> kinship, institute a reality by using the power of revelation and construction exercised by objectification in discourse. (p. 223)

In this passage, Bourdieu extends the disciplinary conversation about the role of language in social formations. He transcends the limited confines of communication and representation that scholars had ascribed to language, and embraces the notion that language also encapsulates and circumscribes identity. Although in this passage he calls attention only to the emergence of "regionalist discourse," his overriding concerns are the social and cultural impulses that activate deviations from the norm in the signifying practices of linguistic communities—or what Wenger (1988) calls "communities of practice"—and how this constructs and constrains identities. Thus, we might add that a third function of language—in addition to communication and representation—is the construction, reconstruction, deconstruction, and constriction of identities, especially group identities, which Edwards (2012) conceptualized as the way "we conceive ourselves as individuals or as members of groups—or, indeed, the way others perceive and categorize us" (p. 411). Since identity "inheres in actions, not in people" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 376), "the way others perceive and categorize us"—particularly in language use—is more consequential than people's self-definition of their identities because identity is constituted, for the most part, through the congelation of observable, habitual communicative and sociolinguistic practices.

Joseph (2004) notes that, "A consistent theme within studies of national identity over the last four decades has been the central importance of language in its formation" (p. 94). In other words, as Bucholtz and Hall (2004) point out, language is the core symbolic resource people deploy in the cultural constitution and reconstitution of identity. This fact is particularly intriguing when applied to postcolonial nation-states with disparate people who speak a multiplicity of mutually unintelligible native languages, but who are nonetheless ironically glued by an external language imposed by colonizers, that is, where the language of primordial affinity is not the language of global identity. The colonial languages of many formerly colonized countries (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, etc.) have emerged as the main building blocks in the linguistic construction of the national identities of formerly colonized people (Adamson, 1989; Brysk, Parsons, & Sandholtz, 2002; Simpson, 2008).

There is a symbiotic, mutually reinforcing relationship between language and identity. Language structures identity as much as identity structures language. The shibboleths, expressive repertoires, and social, cultural, and symbolic cues with which members of society appropriate, lexicalize, and semanticize social reality are not only socially constituted but work to delimit identities. Thus, although formerly colonial languages have become constitutive and reflective of the identities of formerly colonized people, the formerly colonial languages are not structurally unaffected by their encounter with the formerly colonialized

people. The languages are inflected by the cultures, historical experiences, and sociolinguistic quiddities of their new linguistic environments, and this fact, in turn, sets boundaries to and delimits the identity of its speakers. The cultural and discursive unconscious of the speakers reflect this sociolinguistic reality. This is particularly true of the English language, which has quietly emerged as the world's lingua franca. As Schneider (2007) has observed,

> [. . .]English has diversified, developed into homegrown forms and uses in many locations. It has become an indigenized language, even a mother tongue, in several countries around the globe. In some countries, the descendants of former colonists or colonizers have retained the language to the present day; in others, interestingly enough, it was the local, indigenous population who have adopted and appropriated the English language for themselves, thus contributing to its diversification. (p. 1)

As the next section shows, although Nigeria is home to a multiplicity of mutually unintelligible languages, it is linguistically agglutinated by the English language, but it is a variety of English that both reflects and inflects the native population's sociohistorical, linguistic, and cultural specificities.

A Brief History of Nigerian English

English first appeared in what later became known as Nigeria in the 16th century when British traders and slavers set foot in the region (Spencer, 1971). But it was the nascence, in 1840s southern Nigeria, of Christian missionism, which White (1996) described as the "unofficial partner" (p. 18) in the imperial project, that expanded the communicative utility of English beyond episodic trade-related contexts. The formal colonization of Nigeria, which started on January 1, 1901 (Falola, 1999), not only gave English a quasi-official status but also instituted it as the passport for upward social mobility. After independence from British colonialism in 1960, the country's postindependence leaders chose to retain English as the official language. This was hardly surprising. With more than 500 distinct, mutually unintelligible languages, an ethnically neutral language for interethnic communication became imperative, and English fit the bill (U. B. Gut, 2008). Thus, as Schneider (2007) points out, English has emerged as "the dominant language of the mass media, business transactions, politics, advertising, the courts, science and technology, and so on, and simply the language of interethnic communication among educated Nigerians" (p. 205).

Nonetheless, as famous Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (1988) reminded us, "And let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English, for we intend to do unheard of things with it" (p. 50). In other words, the English Nigerians speak and write must carry the weight of their culture, discursive idiosyncrasies, and rhetorical self-definitions, which will, of necessity, mark it off from native

varieties. A distinct, syntactically recognizable, structurally stable variety of English with an unquestionably identifiable Nigerian flavor, with which Nigerians did "unheard-of things," emerged by the mid-1960s and caught the attention of a few linguists. In a 1967 article, for instance, N. G. Walsh wrote: "The varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians, no matter what their language, have enough features in common to mark off a general type, which may be called Nigerian English" (cited in Ogbu, 1992, p. 88).

Over the years, many scholars have explored and identified the structural, semantic, and phonological features of Nigerian English (see, e.g., Adegbija, 1989; Alabi, 2000; Alo & Mesthrie, 2004; Bamgbose, 1996; Bamiro, 1994; Banjo, 1996; Banjo, 1997; Igboanusi, 2002; Jowitt, 1991; Udofot, 2003). Nigerian English takes its distinctive form and flavor from at least five main sources: lexical improvisation to give expression to unique Nigerian sociocultural thoughts and artifacts that are not lexicalized in Standard English; British archaisms that were once contemporary when they appeared in Nigeria; grammatical infractions by the political, cultural, and intellectual elite that have been sanctioned and reproduced by the symbolic power of the mass media; innocent admixture of British and American English (such as "torchlight," which blends the British English "torch" with the American English "flashlight," or "shortknicker," which combines the American English "shorts" with the British English "knickers"); and biblical English which, for instance, predisposes Nigerian English speakers to call prostitutes "harlots" and use "doxology" in place of "praise" (Kperogi, 2015; Wilmott, 1979).

These structural features—particularly excessive lexical formality even in informal contexts, an outsized fondness for stuffy archaisms, and biblical flourishes in nonreligious contexts—manifest prominently in e-mail scams that originate from Nigeria, as the data analysis section demonstrates. While previous research has explored the rhetorical and persuasive techniques (Dyrud, 2005; Kich, 2005), grammatical features (Blommaert & Omoniyi, 2006; Cukier, Nesselroth, & Cody, 2007) and digital forensic markers (Ofulue, 2010) of Nigerian 419 e-mail scams, no research has grappled with how the distinctive stylistic and grammatical features of the e-mails function as symbolic resources for the digital construction—and potential pathologization—of Nigerian identity.

Nigerian E-Mail Scams

Nigerian e-mail scams, also known as advance fee fraud or "419" scams in reference to the southern Nigeria Criminal Code that criminalizes the impersonation of government officials for pecuniary gratification (Smith, Holmes, & Kaufmann, 1999), have been pervading cyberspace since the late 1990s (Glickman, 2005). They have become so omnipresent that trying to escape from them has now become almost as difficult as trying to hide from daylight: You can do it only

with an effort so strenuous that it reaches the point of absurdity. The e-mails inundate mailboxes of millions of e-mail account holders all over the world with such persistence and relentlessness that the U.S. Federal Trade Commission characterized their incidence as having assumed "epidemic proportions" (Catan & Peel, 2003). The U.S. Secret Service, a major government body charged with the responsibility to combat the cybercrime, also described them as "a Mount Everest of fraud" (Kaplan, 2001).

So notoriously pervasive are the Nigerian advance fee fraud e-mails that the Washington, DC–based National Consumer League described them as the second biggest consumer come-on on the Internet, outrivaled only by pitches for "herbal Viagra" (Carbonara & Manson, 2003). And, according to the 2015 report of the Internet Crime Complaint Center, 419 e-mail scams were the second most reported online fraud complaints in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). This statistic is broadly true in most Anglophone countries, ensuring that Nigerian e-mail scams have become the dianoetic prism through which most of the English world visualizes and constructs perceptions of Nigerians. In other words, e-mail scams that emanate from Nigeria have become the biggest exporters of Nigerian English to the world, and one of the core elements by which Nigerian identity is constructed in the global imaginary. Most importantly, though, because the English represented in 419 e-mail scams emanate from the expressive, lexical, and grammatical repertoire of Nigerian English, it unwittingly contributes to the pathologization and criminalization of the "English world's fastest-growing non-native variety" (Kperogi, 2015, p. x) and its users.

In what follows, I outline the methodology used for the study, identify some of the most prominent grammatical, stylistic, and structural characteristics of the English of 419 scam e-mails, and locate their provenance to the vast, expanding, and exciting repertory of Nigerian English.

Methodology

Using a combination of case study research and qualitative discourse analysis, I collected e-mail samples from the database of "The Crime of Persuasion" website (http://www.crimes-of-persuasion.com/), a "consumer-fraud awareness" site against "schemes, scams and frauds" operated by Les Henderson, a Canadian consumer-rights author and webmaster. The website has a massive archive of Nigerian scam e-mails, collected by Henderson, right from their emergence to the present. Many of the e-mail samples were user-submitted. The site also chronicles the mutations of the scams from their emergence as snail mails in the mid-1980s to the present. Using a stratified sampling method, every other e-mail in the corpus was read. The e-mails were categorized into 13 broad themes, and samples were analyzed for each theme, amounting to 55 e-mails in total. Most 419 e-mail scams fall into one of the following

13 categories: over-invoice, deposed leader, inheritance, dead foreigner, charity gifts, trade deals, asset transfer, marked currency or "Black dollar," donation plea, job offers, scholarships, check, and personal ad scams.

Because this study is interested only in examining the structural, stylistic, and grammatical articulations of Nigerian scam e-mails and how these articulations reflect and construct a Nigerian cyber identity, the unit of analysis was the content of individual e-mails. While an analysis of the perspectives of the victims of the fraudulent e-mail solicitations would be worthwhile, it is beyond the scope of this study to inquire into that. Although only a relatively small number of e-mails was selected for this study, it is broadly representative of the range of 419 scam e-mails that emanate from Nigeria. Flyvbjerg (2006) points out that qualitative researchers interested in maximizing and generating the widest possible range of information from small, single cases adopt an information-oriented selection of samples. The samples selected for this study also exemplify what Flyvbjerg calls "paradigmatic" cases, which are samples that draw attention to "exemplars," to prototypes, and to instances that throw a particular social phenomenon into bold relief. As Eisenhardt (1989) has noted, in qualitative social science research, cases are chosen "for theoretical, not statistical, reasons" (p. 537) and for their capacity to "replicate or extend theory by filling conceptual categories" (p. 533).

The study's primary object of inquiry is text, and several scholars have persuasively argued that identity is constructed, negotiated, and articulated in text (see, for instance, Anderson, 1983; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). The next section makes this point more fully.

Grammatical, Stylistic, and Structural Features of 419 English

The Nigerian scam e-mails examined for this study exhibited the following common, identifiable grammatical, stylistic, and structural features: unconventional collocations, reclassification of parts of speech, use of false titles, excessive and unaccustomed lexical formality, irreverent informality, lexical distortion of Standard English idioms, reclassification of traditionally uncountable nouns to countable nouns, obsequiousness, quaint and unidiomatic expressions, and inappropriate, exhibitionistic expressions of religiosity.

Unconventional Collocations

Crystal (1997) points out that "the notion of collocation focuses on the extent to which lexemes come together randomly or predictably" (p. 162). Native English speakers acquire the lexical chunks that occur in their language effortlessly. For instance, the lexical properties of idioms, phrasal verbs, and other frozen, formulaic expressions are often predictable and invariable. It is unlikely, for

example, that a native English speaker would say "put up on" instead of "put up with." Many Nigerian English expressions, however, deviate from the collocational rhythm of Standard British and American English, and this is reflected in the English of 419 e-mail scams. As Okoro (2013) notes, "there are notable peculiarities and errors in the patterns of both lexical and grammatical collocations in Nigerian English, and these contribute significantly to the features that set NigE apart from other varieties of English" (p. 84). A few of these collocational deviations are discussed as follows:

"Reply me." In the expression "reply me," which appeared in all the e-mail samples examined for this study, the preposition "to," which collocates with "reply," is dispensed with. See, for instance, this sentence from a 2002 e-mail: "AS SOON AS YOU RECEIVE THIS MESSAGE, PLEASE DO REPLY ME IMMEDIATELY BECAUSE MY FATHER DID PAID [sic] MONEY FOR THE SAFE KEEPING OF THE BOX FOR SHORT PERIOD OF TIME NOT KNOWING HE IS GOING TO DIE." Although "reply" always co-occurs with "to" in the standard varieties of English in Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, it is an inescapable structural characteristic of Nigerian English to never collocate "reply" and "to." This feature of Nigerian English may owe its provenance to the headline English of Nigerian newspapers, which habitually dispense with prepositions in headlines to save space. Headlines like, "You lied, Jonathan replies Obasanjo" (Aziken & Agande, 2013), "Buhari replies wife, says Aisha 'belongs to my kitchen'" (Gesinde, 2016), "Presidency replies Sanusi" (Punch, 2016), and so on, instead of "You lied, Jonathan replies to Obasanjo," "Buhari replies to wife, says Aisha 'belongs to my kitchen'," and so on, are normative in Nigerian media English and in popular Nigerian English.

"To enable me do something." E-mail scams that originate from Nigeria or from Nigerians who may be geographically located outside Nigeria typically ask their marks to send their bank account numbers, contact information, and so on "to enable me [sic] transfer the money to you"—or such other phrase. Here is an example from the archive: "Please contact me immediately through my telephone number whether or not you are interested in this deal. If you are not, it will enable me scout for another foreign partner to carry out this deal." Again, here, unlike in native English varieties, the verb "enable" does not co-occur with the preposition "to." Many scholars of Nigerian English have identified the tendency to omit the preposition "to" in the collocation "enable someone/something to do something" as one of the key features of that dialect of English (see, for instance, Blench, 2005). Where native speakers would say, "I moved back to my hometown to enable me to be closer to my parents," Nigerian English speakers would say, "I moved back to my hometown to enable me be closer to my parents."

"Request for." While Nigerian 419 e-mails dispense with the prepositional complements of collocational expressions such as "reply to" and "enable one

to," they insert lexical elements in expressions that do not normally have them. Several 419 e-mail solicitations from the samples collected for this study had the following sentence: "I request for your help to transfer the money for investment in your country." In a job-offer e-mail scam that purports to emanate from "Deltron International" in Amsterdam, the following sentence appears: "We hereby request for the following for documentation and further processing as directed by our headquarters." In native English varieties, when "request" is used as a verb, it traditionally does not admit of a preposition. But it does in Nigerian English. Instead of "request for your permission" or "request for your help," native speakers say "request your permission" or "request your help." The juxtaposition of "request" and "for" is so fossilized in Nigerian English that it even appears on the website of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, one of Nigeria's oldest and most prestigious universities. The university tells its alumni that they "can request for more than one transcript at the same time" (University of Nigeria, n.d.).

Reclassification of Parts of Speech

One of the structural trademarks of Nigerian English is a fondness for reclassifying the parts of speech of words. Adjectives and adverbs often tend to be reclassified as verbs, as the following examples illustrate.

"Opportuned." The adjective "opportune," which means suitable (as in, "that's an opportune place to rest") or timely (as in, "the opportune arrival of the police saved him from mob lynching") is often used as a verb—chiefly in the past tense—in Nigerian English to mean "have the opportunity to." That is why expressions like, "I was not opportuned to see him," "when I'm opportuned to serve my people," and so on, are common in Nigerian English. In one of the scam e-mails examined for this study, the scammer wrote: "I was opportuned during my service to lodge this huge sum of US$55million (Fifty five million United States dollars) in a bank during the illegal diamond sales three years ago when Sierra Leone was in top crisis." No other variety of English in the world uses "opportune" as a verb—a reason it stands out in the narratives of 419 e-mail scams. Presumably, "opportuned" is a back-formation from "opportunity."

"Tantamount." This is another adjective that Nigerian English speakers habitually transform into a verb. It appears in the following construction in the samples of 419 e-mails examined for this study: "It tantamounts to discrimination to deny me the inheritance from my parents." In Standard English, that sentence would be, "it is tantamount to discrimination to deny me the inheritance from my parents" because "tantamount" is not a verb.

"Suffer us." The noun "suffer" also suffers unconventional reclassification in Nigerian English. In one of the 419 e-mails collected for this study, the phrase "he is out to suffer us" stood out. The e-mail was from a person who purported

to be the wife of the late General Sani Abacha, Nigeria's brutal military Head of State who died in 1998. The writer said she wanted to invest the stupendous wealth that the late Abacha bequeathed to her outside Nigeria because President Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria's president between 1999 and 2007, was "out to suffer us."

In Standard English, to "suffer" somebody is to tolerate or put up with them even if one finds them unpleasant. That is why the Standard English idiom "(not) to suffer fools gladly" means (not) to tolerate or put up with the stupidity of people. However, when the 419 e-mail said the Obasanjo government was "out to suffer us," it meant that the government of the day wanted to make Abacha's children suffer for the alleged sins of their father.

"Doesn't worth it." One scam e-mail said staying in Nigeria in the face of the certain clamp-down of the government "doesn't worth it." Here, the adjective "worth" has been verbified. A native English speaker would have said "it's not worth it" since "worth" is never used to express action.

"Horn." Another example of the reclassification of the parts of speech of Standard English words can be found in such popular Nigerian English expressions as "horn before overtaking" for "honk/toot your horn before you speed past me." In Standard English, "horn" is never used as a verb when reference is to the warning sounds that the horns of automobiles make. The preferred verbs are "honk" and "toot." When "horn" is used as a verb, it usually means to stab with a horn, that is, the long, pointed outgrowth on the head of some animals.

Unconventional adverbs. Several 419 scam e-mails contain unconventional adverbial formations like "outrightly"—a redundant, nonexistent adverbial inflection of the word "outright," which is actually both an adjective and an adverb in Standard English and therefore does not need the "ly" morpheme. Another fond but unconventional adverbial formation in Nigerian English is "installmentally." It is used where native speakers would say "in installments." The sample contains many e-mails that proposed to refund money to their marks "installmentally."

Use of False Titles

One of the invariable stylistic imprints of Nigerian 419 scammers is their obsession with titles, particularly titles that are unconventional in the West. Senders often prefix to their names occupational titles that are unknown in the rest of the English-speaking world. Examples are "Barrister," "Engineer" (often abbreviated as "Engr."), "Architect" (often abbreviated as "Arc."), Pharmacist (often abbreviated to Pharm.), and so on. It is usual in Nigeria for people with an engineering degree to prefix "Engineer" to their names. People with a law degree also prefix "Barrister" to their names, architects prefix "Arc." to theirs, and so on, all in a bid to confer authority on themselves, and to call attention to their professional identity and accomplishments. The practice derives its origins,

it would seem, by analogy to medical doctors who universally prefix "Dr." to their names.

When the e-mail scammers (and other honest Nigerians) do not use unconventional occupational titles (such as Barrister, Engr., Arc., Pharm., Surveyor, etc.), they use courtesy titles like "Mr.," "Mrs.," and "Miss" in their self-introductions: "I am Miss Comfort from Nigeria and I wish to know you more," reads one of the e-mails in our sample. This excessive formality would strike native English speakers as stilted and unnatural.

Related to this is the obsession with stacking multiple courtesy, occupational, cultural, and academic titles for one individual, such as the use of "Dr. (Mrs.)," "Prof. (Mrs.)," "Dr. (Mrs.) Princess," "Alhaji (Dr.) Chief," "Barrister Dr. Chief," "Rt. Hon. Dr.," and so on, before people's names. The multiple titles are designed to bestow awe, social status, and authority on the bearers (see Chiluwa, 2010). The importance of the title "Hon." (short for "honorable") and "Dr." after the name is to indicate that the author is a member of either the state or federal legislature in addition to being a PhD or a medical doctor. And because being married while professionally successful is a culturally prized status symbol for Nigerian women, the appearance of "Mrs." in a married woman's stack of titles is indispensable. Many Nigerian English speakers have no awareness of the geographic and cultural particularity of their conventions of address and let it inflect their dialogic styles even when they communicate with non-Nigerians.

Scammers who impersonate high-ranking Nigerian traditional rulers also deploy the honorific "His Royal Highness," or HRH for short, which is unconventional by the standards of British English from where Nigerian English borrowed it. In British English, kings or monarchs are addressed as "His Royal Majesty," and only princes and princesses are addressed as "His Royal Highness." Many British citizens not familiar with Nigeria's conventions of address mistake Nigerian monarchs for princes because of the "His Royal Highness" (or HRH) honorific that precedes their names.

This convention of address is traceable to the period of colonialism when British colonizers regarded and addressed all traditional rulers in their colonies as no more than "princes," since there could only be one king or queen in the Commonwealth. Although Nigeria declared itself a republic in 1963, 3 years after independence from British colonialism, the colonial linguistic tradition that demoted Nigerian kings to mere princes endures.

Excessive Lexical Formality

One of the enduring stylistic idiosyncrasies of Nigerian English is the tendency to use turgid, formal, unusual, and archaic words in informal contexts. For instance, the word "demurrage" appears in many shipping-related 419 e-mails.

In a 2002 user-submitted e-mail solicitation, the writer who purports to be a southern African, wrote:

> Before the death of my father, he had taken me to Johannesburg to deposit . . . private security company . . . deposited in a box as gemstones to avoid much demurrage . . . for establishment of new farms in Swaziland.

This is a recondite, archaic English word, which is nonetheless commonly used in informal Nigerian English to denote a charge required as compensation for the delay of a ship or freight car or other cargo beyond its scheduled time of departure. Ubahakwe (cited in Jowitt, 2016, p. 26) calls this character of Nigerian English "bookish"—the tendency to hold on to words and expressions that have run out of fashion in, and receded to the linguistic backyard of, modern native-speaker usage, and that are exaggeratedly Latinate. Other regularly occurring "bookish English" words in informal Nigerian English, and in the English of 419 e-mails, are "imprest" (monthly or weekly petty cash for government officials to spend), "estacode" (daily travel allowance for government officials, etc., borrowed and distorted from the British English "Estacode," which is a portmanteau of Establishment Code), and "parastatal" (a wholly or partly owned government corporation, such as the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation that is often the subject of several 419 e-mail solicitations).

Irreverent Informality

While Nigerian scam e-mails can be exaggeratedly formal in the tone of their language and in the use of courtesy titles where they are not necessary, they often can slip into informality that borders on the irreverent. In the e-mail samples archived in the Crime of Passion site, expressions such as "he gave up the ghost" or "he kicked the bucket" to denote dying are frequent. A 419 e-mail reads:

> But before he gave up the ghost, it was as if he knew he was going to die. He my father, MAY HIS SOUL REST IN PERFECT PEACE he disclosed to me that he deposited the sum of $28,000,000,00 US Dollars (TWENTY EIGHT MILLION DOLLARS) in a security company here in Abidjan-Cote d'Ivoire.

This would strike most native English speakers as inappropriate in an e-mail communication, but such expressions are common in Nigerian English even in formal contexts.

Lexical Distortion of Standard English Idioms

Nigerian English, like many nonnative English varieties, habitually substitutes, omits, or distorts the lexical properties of fixed expressions in Standard English.

Common examples are "be at the safer side" (be on the safe side), "I appreciate" (I appreciate it), "one hell of trouble" (one hell of a lot of trouble), "he is in soup" (he is in the soup), "you can never eat your cake and have it" (you can't have your cake and eat it), "benefit of doubt" (the benefit of the doubt), "in affirmative" (in the affirmative), and "more grease to your elbow" (more power to you). The omission of articles in expressions such as "in soup," "benefit of doubt" is certainly inspired by Nigerian newspaper headline English where anxieties about space cause copyeditors to dispense with articles and conjunctions in news headlines. While this feature of headlines is not unique to Nigerian journalism (see Biber, 2004), it has influenced demotic spoken and written English in Nigeria in ways it has not elsewhere.

The most common lexical distortion that appears in the English of 419 e-mails is the expression "be rest assured." Typical 419 e-mail solicitations entreat their would-be preys to "be rest assured" of the authenticity of the scam they are proposing. "Please be rest assured and feel free to go into this transaction with us," read one of the e-mails in the sample examined for this study. This frequently used 419 scam e-mail lingo is socially prestigious, mainstream Nigerian English.

The fixed English idiom that this Nigerian English expression distorts is "rest assured," that is, to be certain. It is rare in Nigerian English for the expression to be rendered without the pointless and intrusive "be." The following sentence is an example of how the phrase regularly occurs in popular Nigerian English: "You should be rest assured that I will not disappoint you." The "be" in the phrase is superfluous and entirely absent in native English varieties.

It appears that the lexical distortion is a consequence of what grammarians call the habitual, uninflected, or unconjugated "be" (i.e., where the verb "to be" does not change form under any circumstance), which occurs in Nigerian Pidgin English (such as in the expression "I be don see am today," i.e., "I have seen him today"), in African-American Vernacular English (such as in the expression "she be mean to me," i.e., "she is mean to me"), and in many English-based pidgins and creoles (Ewers, 1996). It is reasonable to argue that the addition of "be" before the idiom "rest assured" in Nigerian English is attributable to the influence of Nigerian Pidgin English, which derives its structural characteristics from several native Nigerian languages and most of its vocabulary from English. Or, perhaps, it is inspired by a false analogy to expressions like "be careful," "be nice," and so on, but in Standard English two verbs do not usually follow each other sequentially. In the phrase "be rest assured," both "be" and "rest" are verbs. But in "be careful" and "be nice," "careful" and "nice" are adjectives, so the analogy is false. Since expressions like "be sleep well" or "be go knowing that," and so on, are absent in Nigerian English, it is hard to fathom why the expression "be rest assured" emerged and took firm roots in Nigerian English.

The Reclassification of Uncountable Nouns to Countable Nouns

There are certain nouns in English that are invariably uncountable and that do not admit of plural forms, but which Nigerian English speakers pluralize. Examples of nouns that are not pluralized and therefore are not inflected with a terminal "s" in Standard English are "information," "ammunition," "equipment," "aircraft," "cutlery," "invective," "luggage," "offspring," "advice," "personnel," "legislation," "yesteryear," "heyday," "vermin," and so on. Dyrud's (2005) exploration of 419 e-mails titled "I brought you a good news: An analysis of Nigerian 419 letters" calls attention to this feature of Nigerian English.

Because these unconventional pluralizations are unique to Nigerian English—and have been popularized to the Anglophone world by Nigerian 419 scammers—it is easy for e-mail authorship identification programs to isolate e-mail messages that contain them.

Obsequiousness

Excessive, inappropriate politeness in language is another structural characteristic of Nigerian scam e-mails. The expression "with due respect" is the favorite marker of politeness in Nigerian English. This phrase often appears in the subject lines of 419 e-mail scams—and in the subject lines of legitimate e-mails from honest Nigerians. It also regularly appears as a prefatory remark before a 419 scam proposition. Typical constructions with the phrase go something like this: "With due respect to you, I crave your indulgence for the unsolicited nature of this letter." Native English speakers find this typically Nigerian English usage of "with due respect" bewildering.

First, the usual rendering of the expression is "with all due respect." Second, native English speakers use the phrase only when they want to politely disagree with someone, as in, "with all due respect, that statement is not accurate." Whenever the phrase "with due respect" is uttered, the people to whom it is addressed always prepare themselves for a mild, tempered criticism. So when Nigerians write "with due respect" and do not follow it up with a criticism or a disagreement, native English speakers are often befuddled. In Nigerian English, "with due respect" simply means "in a respectful manner"; it denotes that the writer wishes to convey the sense that she holds the addressee in high esteem. (Indians say "respected sir" where Nigerians would say "with due respect"; both are strange to native English ears).

Quaint, Unidiomatic Expressions

The prevalence of quaint, unidiomatic, or outright ungrammatical expressions is another prototypic trail of English usage in 419 e-mails. One recurring example is, "I and my colleagues." In formal Standard English grammar, "I" often comes

last unless the writer is the absolute ruler of a kingdom. Native speakers would say, "my colleagues and I" instead of "I and my colleagues" in formal settings. Other dead stylistic giveaways of Nigerianisms in 419 e-mail scams are, "I cannot be able to" for "I can't," ending the subject line of an e-mail with a period, writing in all caps, and so on. "I hope to read from you soon," a popular phrase to end letters in Nigerian English, is another example of unidiomatic English that has been popularized by Nigerian 419 e-mail scams. Native English speakers typically end correspondence with, "I hope to hear from you." As we saw in the Introduction section, this expression invited an unwelcome criminal suspicion to a Nigerian professor.

Conclusions

Since identity inheres not in people but in their actions, their discursive shibboleths, their textual trails, and their overall communicative rituals, the English Nigerians write online, which is a product of their cultural and linguistic domestication of the language, defines them. The incorporeality of online identity and the asynchronicity and anonymity of its communicative modes particularly confer added valence to textual language. It makes linguistic artifacts such as e-mails the main instruments for the construction of cultural subjectivities and identities. In corporeal, nonymous, synchronous dialogic encounters, communicated messages have a chance to have the stamp of individuality, but this prospect diminishes in the anonymic cover of digital environments. It is precisely this fact that conduces to the construction of Nigerian identity in the global consciousness through Nigerian e-mail scams. As Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008, p. 1831) pointed out, "[online] identity is not an individual characteristic; it is not an expression of something innate in a person, it is rather a social product, the outcome of a given social environment." The distinctive stylistic imprints of Nigerian scam e-mails are fundamentally rooted in the vast and varied corpora of Nigerian English, which is a fascinating convergence of (archaic) British English and the structural echoes of a whole host of hierarchically subordinate, "marked" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 372) Nigerian languages. This lingual convergence of British English superstrate and a substrate of a medley of Nigerian languages is reproduced and sanctified, if not cultivated, in the Nigerian news media, as I have shown in the previous sections of this article.

Several of the stereotypic Nigerian expressions identified in this article constitute the lexical core in the construction of what is called "terminology engineering in e-mail fraud detection" (Kerremans, Tang, Temmerman, & Zhao, 2005, p. 110) to track and trash fraudulent Nigerian e-mail solicitations. That means 419 scam e-mails have caused the linguistic singularities of even honest Nigerians to be pathologized and criminalized, especially because 419 e-mails have done more to popularize Nigerian English to the rest of the English-speaking world than any Nigerian cultural artifact. The stylistic imprints

of scam e-mails from Nigeria vicariously criminalize many innocent Nigerians, as the example of the Nigerian professor I mentioned in the beginning of this article shows. As many scholars have noted, identity, especially digital identity, inheres primarily in text. Since even text is a culturally contingent mode of articulation, it aids in the delimiting of incorporeal digital identities that lack marked individuality.

Concerns about authorship attribution of fraudulent e-mail communications emerged fairly early in studies of Internet fraud (Gray, Sallis, & McDonell, 1997, 1998). Computational linguists and information systems specialists have deployed strategies to perform software forensics with intent to identify the authors of fraudulent e-mails. De Vel, Anderson, Corney, and Mohay (2001), for instance, employed a Support Vector Machine learning algorithm for mining e-mail content based on its structural characteristics and linguistic patterns in order to provide authorship evidence of scam e-mails for use within a legal context. Several forensic linguistic programs have developed e-mail authorship identification markers based solely on phrases and expressions that are unique to 419 e-mail scams. The software developed from these programs helps people automatically trash "419-sounding" e-mails.

The problem is that the software also cause many legitimate e-mails from honest Nigerians to be deleted since the alarm triggers for the software are uniquely Nigerian English expressions. "Hope to read from you soon," for instance, features prominently in the repertoire of "red-flag" expressions many software programs use to identify 419 e-mails, as a search of the expression on search engines such as Google shows. As Kropko (2016) points out,

> Google and other email clients use Baye's rule to sort e-mail messages like [Nigerian 419 emails] into your spam folder by looking at particular words and combination of words. The downside is that sometimes perfectly legitimate e-mails get sorted into the spam folder because they contain these words as well. (p. 102)

It is entirely plausible that the Nigerian professor referenced in the beginning of this essay was told his English was "suspect" only because his unique Nigerian expressions triggered Nigerian 419 e-mail authorship identification red flags. It therefore will not be entirely misplaced to characterize the whole host of 419 e-mail authorship identification programs as engaging in borderline linguistic xenophobic identity mapping because they basically pathologize and criminalize the stylistic idiosyncrasies of an entire nonnative English variety. This speaks to what Beer (2017) calls the "social power" of algorithms, that is, the capacity for algorithmic computation to mediate and define the contours of online sociality and to act as a stand-in for even offline dialogic and communicative encounters. As he points out,

> It is far more common for algorithmic processes to pass us by without being noticed. Once we begin to reflect on the scale of these processes—with algorithms,

> sorting, filtering, searching, prioritising, recommending, deciding and so on—it is perhaps little wonder that a discussion of the social role of algorithms is picking up pace. (p. 2)

Algorithms derive the social basis of their power from the notion of their "objectivity," "rationality," immunity from human manipulation and, most importantly, the "way that it becomes part of a discursive understanding of desirability and efficiency in which the mention of algorithms is part of 'a code of normalization'" (p. 9). That is why the technological coding of English usage patterns by e-mail authorship programs is not only relied upon as an unerring measure of anonymic online identities but also as a dependable marker of abnormality.

Algorithmic pathologization of e-mail communication, instantiated by the experience of the Nigerian professor who was characterized as "suspect" because of his Nigerian linguistic singularities, reduces sociolinguistic complexity to essentialist, homogenizing lexical and syntactic stereotypes. It isolates deviations from established usage norms and constructs them as anomalous, "suspect," and even criminal. This sort of stigmatization feeds on visible linguistic markers of identity, but its decontextualization traps many unintended victims, such as the Nigerian professor referenced in the prefatory section of this paper.

Most Nigerians who were socialized and educated in Nigeria, irrespective of their level and quality of education, cannot escape Nigerian English inflections in their quotidian communicative encounters every once in a while. Bourdieu's (1977) point about the inescapable social and cultural embeddedness of language and its performativity (Bourdieu, 1991) is relevant here. Legendary Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, in defending his creative nativization of English idioms and conventions once said any language that is impudent enough to extend beyond its natural habitat should realize that it would be domesticated, relexicalized, and resemancitized to fit the sociocultural needs of its new location and users (Achebe, 1997; Ohaeto, 1997).

The 419 scam artists who invade e-mail users' inboxes with their grammatically quaint expressions write the way they do because they are the products of the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment. For instance, in quotidian Nigerian life, identity is performed through the exhibitionistic preening of the rituals and idioms of religiosity. In particular, the vernacular of Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity has emerged as a fundamental source of Nigerian English. The linguistic seepage of the vernaculars and registers of Nigerian Pentecostalism into popular Nigerian English occurs primarily through Nollywood movies, from where it percolates into the Nigerian news media and later to the general population. Nigerian Pentecostal Christian English codes have now become so widespread that even Nigerian Muslims and non-Pentecostal Nigerian Christians have unconsciously co-opted them in their conversational repertoires,

and this is inflected in the language of both honest and fraudulent Nigerian e-mail writers.

In other words, the stylistic markers that computational linguists, information systems specialists, and e-mail clients use to identify 419 e-mail scams are drawn from the vast repertoire of idiosyncratic Nigerian English, which draws heavily from Nigerian culture. It is similar to isolating American English expressions that appear regularly in the e-mails of American scammers and developing an authorship identification program based on these expressions so that any e-mail from any American, including even the American president, that uses any stereotyped American English expression is automatically "suspect." Lippi-Green (1997) reminds us that language is the "most salient way we have of establishing our identities" (p. 5). In our increasingly digital, often anonymic world, that language is primarily textual, making text, such as e-mails, a central site for the production, negotiation, and articulation of digital identities. In Nigeria, the language that embodies and articulates national identity, that is, the wordage that typifies Nigerian English usage, is one that 419 e-mail scammers have caused to be unwittingly pathologized by e-mail clients and digital forensic programs.

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